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Democracy and Compulsory Service

George Gordon
G. G. COULTON

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DEMOCRACY AND COMPULSORY SERVICE

UNPREJUDICED men are now beginning to realise that Compulsory Military Service has an honorable history in the past, that it is doing most honorable work at this moment, and that it may be unfair to damn all compulsory systems under the single unpopular term of Conscription. The word is convenient, of course, but it has the fatal defect of confusing between very different manifestations of a single principle. If all compulsory military service is conscription, then conscription was warmly supported, not from political opportunism but on principle, by Jaurès, Vaillant, Bebel, and all the greatest among those Pacifists and Internationalists who have not had the peculiar good fortune to inhabit the United States of America, or Britain in the narrowest sense of the term.¹ It may safely be said that four-fifths of the Radicals and Socialists in the civilised world are convinced conscriptionists in this sense. The one country which has been fundamentally and consistently conscriptionist for the last six centuries is Switzerland. "the laboratory of democratic experiments." Yet, when we hear the word *Conscription*, we think not of democracies but autocracies; not of Switzerland but of Germany. It is literally true to say that the compulsory militia service of Switzerland, where all men start in the ranks and no man need spend more than seven months of his whole life under military training, differs as much from the German system as a glass of beer differs from a pint of whiskey. To a few temperance cranks, this difference is negligible; and to some people all different forms of "conscription" will doubtless always remain similarly indistinguishable. In the past this confusion has

¹ New Zealand and South Africa are, it will be remembered, "conscriptionist" countries.

been very general; for it sprang from a thoughtlessness and ignorance natural enough in their time, though now fast disappearing in the world's present serious mood. We can look away now from words to things: remembering that conscripts once defended Liège, and are still defending Verdun, we are prepared to recognise in conscription, not only certain forces of evil, but also potentialities of much good. We see that the problem here, as in every other field of human civilisation, is to seize upon things which are manifold in their natural action; and, by the help of those faculties which distinguish man from brute, to control and direct this natural action; to neutralise the evil while we give free play to the good. Conscription is certainly a bad master, but we now ask ourselves whether it may not be a good servant.

Until quite recently, such unprejudiced inquiry was almost impossible among the general public. Certainly a very large number of educated and thinking men, perhaps even the majority, told us they were opposed to conscription *on principle*. The war has cleared our minds here, as in other directions. We see now that, with ninety-nine men out of a hundred, it was really not a question of absolute principle but of military expediency. Many men held opinions not easily reconcilable with conscription; but very few found their political or moral principles absolutely incompatible with it, as soon as it began to appear that conscription alone stood between us and the gravest national risks. Even among those who offered the most determined opposition to the Military Service Bill, some had already abandoned the purely voluntary principle at an early stage of the war, and had become not only passive but active agents of partial conscription. It was natural enough, of course, that these should stop short at a certain point in the progress of military compulsion; but that breaking point was not fixed by principle; it was fixed by their conception of military expediency: these men no longer thought that the further result to be obtained would justify the more stringent interference with personal freedom. And, from the merely logical standpoint, this clearance of views is an enormous gain. We see now that consistent non-resisters are the only people who can claim to be absolutely opposed to conscription on principle; and that with all the rest of us, the real question is one of compromise. We seek, each in his own way, a balance between the exigencies of National Defence, and the disadvantages of introducing a new compulsory law, involving the same sorts of hardships and friction that have already attended compulsory education

of the *ancien régime*. To the smaller states of Germany, Napoleon's rule actually brought their first glimmerings of political liberty. After his fall, the Bourbons reverted as much as they could to the "free contract" principle. The short-lived Republic of 1848 contemplated the restoration of universal service, but had no time to realise its ideal. Napoleon III. reverted again to a semi-mercenary system; the Third Republic restored universal service in all its rigour.

Prussia, again, in her most despotic days had feared to arm the whole population: the King, in a public proclamation of 1793, expressly alleged the danger of political unrest as one of his main reasons for refusing to follow the French Revolutionary example. After the disaster of Jena it was a great wave of popular opinion which brought universal service into Prussia, whence it has spread to the rest of Germany. In Prussia, as in Revolutionary France, this movement coincided with a far more thorough organisation of education. It was this universal service and universal education which compelled Bismarck, in 1867, to desert his Conservative friends and grant universal suffrage to the North German Confederation, whence it has passed as a matter of course into the Empire.¹ The fact that universal suffrage has hitherto done so little for German liberty cannot be regarded as final. The awakening of her democracy, which must be only a matter of time, will be immensely quickened by so powerful a political factor; and we may fairly count the Kaiser's despotism, like Napoleon's, as a passing exception.² So long as a despotic government can fight often and win always, it can doubtless bend to its purposes even the democratic system of universal service; but the first great military failure must break this spell.

At the moment when Jean Jaurès was writing in favour of the compulsory principle for home defence, Lord Haldane and Sir Ian Hamilton were attacking the same principle in their

¹ I need hardly say that I here use "universal" in the loose sense in which it commonly used. But it may not be out of place to point out that this war, by its revelation of the power of women's work at any great crisis, even military, will do much to break down old prejudices against the extension of the suffrage.

² We are in great danger of forgetting that, small as may be the political and social freedom of modern Prussia, it is far beyond anything known in the days when military service was to a great extent voluntary. Voltaire and Bernardin de St-Pierre deliberately compared Prussia with Turkey; Burke spoke of her as a typical land of slavery; and Dr. John Moore, in 1787, gave scathing descriptions which suggest that Prussia was even farther beyond Britain in militarism and despotism than she is now. Within the last few months, quite as much mischief has been done by attempts to draw a crude contrast between modern Germany and "the Germany of Goethe and Kant" by the equally superficial attempts to draw hard-and-fast lines between the present German people and their rulers.

Compulsory Service. But all three authors, however divergent in their conclusions, agree on one point, that a nation in arms is a dangerous tool for despots to wield; that it is a good weapon only when the nation is really fighting in self-defence, or can be hypnotised into that state of mind. And no true democrat believes that nations can be permanently hoodwinked. The general connection in history between democracy and universal service—which, of course, means compulsory service—is so evident in the very face of the facts, that our grandchildren will probably find it difficult to understand how Britons could have managed to ignore it for so long. Even the United States of America, the one country of all history whose position has given her the best excuses for ignoring military risks, can supply us with an instance here. Abraham Lincoln was obliged to bring in the Draft Law as part of his determination “that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.” And in defending this Draft Law against its opponents, he reminded them that the original independence of their country had been won partly by the same means.¹ Moreover, the verdict of past history is borne out by the present experience of all Continental States. In these States, which know conscription by experience, not even half of the Socialist parties could be polled against the compulsory principle. Whatever faults democrats may find with the system in detail, they recognise frankly that, of all real armies, the “nation in arms” is the most efficient and the most democratic. Continental anti-compulsionists, therefore, are only to be found amongst Tolstoyans or other extremists who believe in the possibility of total disarmament, and who, in many cases, would abolish even parliamentary government and compulsory taxation. All others, however strong may be their democratic principles, accept compulsion for national defence. They see in it their best safeguard against foreign invasion, which always involves consequences disastrous to social progress. And, with all its disadvantages, they recognise in it the nearest approach to equality of civic sacrifice.

All fair-minded people, therefore, must ask themselves whether past British prejudices against compulsory military service are not founded mainly on insularity of thought. The moment we get outside our own four seas, we find compulsion taken for granted by people as thoughtful and as well-educated as ourselves. Even if we go a little way back in our own

¹ Nicolay and Hay, *Abraham Lincoln*, vol. vii. p. 55.

history, we find that Trafalgar and Waterloo were partly won by conscripts. Moreover, we find a very close analogy to the present problem in the compulsory education question, which was so hotly debated among us for a whole generation from about 1845 onwards. In that memorable discussion, even distinguished statesmen were sometimes convinced that this diminution of individual freedom would involve the loss of higher political and social liberties. "No Prussianism!" was the watchword of the voluntarists, who ignored the fact that not only Prussia, but almost every other civilised nation, had accepted more or less definite compulsion. Eminent politicians indulged in the most fantastic prophecies of slavery and dishonour, if we once abandoned the liberty that was our children's birthright. This should make us cautious of repeating in our own generation the blunder which Macaulay exposed in his speech on the Education Bill of 1847 — the blunder of applying the principle of free competition to a case to which it is not applicable. It is unjust and immoral (argued Macaulay) that men should be free to grow up into ignorant and vicious citizens, a danger rather than a strength to the State. It is unjust and immoral, according to many advanced thinkers of our generation, that men should grow up in enjoyment of liberty, yet with no organised means of defending the State which has done so much for their freedom. Mill, in his essay on Liberty, emphasised the right of the State to claim personal military service from all able-bodied citizens; and Mill advocated for Britain a short-service compulsory militia on the Swiss system. No serious political philosopher, I believe, has ever attempted to meet Mill's abstract arguments; the resistance to compulsory service has really based itself on expediency. But expediency has often sheltered itself behind arguments which, if we press them seriously, lead us to the ground of non-resistance. Yet it is noteworthy that, however definitely a theorist's arguments may imply the principle of non-resistance, very few are bold enough to state clearly, and argue consistently from, a principle which has been abandoned, in practice, even by its extreme advocates. Two attempts have been made to set up non-resistant states—Pennsylvania and Paraguay. Both failed when the time of real stress came; and the attempt has not since been repeated. The excuse for the Pennsylvanian failure which I once heard publicly given by a Friend, before an audience in which Friends were strongly represented, was in itself a clear condemnation of the policy. Pennsylvania lost

its original character (it was explained) because bad men came in and gradually perverted the policy of the State. But how can we exclude bad men under a régime of non-resistance? Moreover, what moral excuse could we find for excluding them? The blessings of non-resistance, like God's rain, should be free to the just and the unjust. If virtue is so much stronger than vice, and if the non-resistant spirit stands so high above the resistant spirit as the theory of non-resistance implies, then the Pennsylvanians ought positively to have welcomed bad men for conversion's sake; and the bad men, so far from distorting Pennsylvanian State policy, ought to have been converted and absorbed by the virtuous inhabitants. The snowball should have rolled victoriously along its greater and greater path, until an avalanche of peace and virtue should have swept over the Western world. Even by its own logic, non-resistance would seem to stand condemned. And it is condemned by the still plainer test of practice. Not only has no fresh attempt been made to base a State on non-resistance, but not even any religious society really bases itself on this principle. Many preachers of non-resistance are very wealthy men; the average income of non-resistant theorists may certainly be estimated as higher than the average income of the world in general. Yet have we a single instance, in all history, of wealth accumulated or kept except with the aid of physical force, either latent or patent? Did not Christ himself teach us of the strong man armed keeping his goods in peace? Would it be possible for a millionaire to remain a millionaire, or even for a prosperous store-keeper to possess plate-glass windows, except under protection of the law, which depends upon the policeman, who frequently has to employ force? An angry and misguided mob may break a pacifist's plate-glass windows, but the sufferer can console himself with the reflection that physical force has only taken away that which physical force had already bestowed, and will bestow again still more abundantly upon those who patiently follow the well-known rules for money-making in civilised countries. Until non-resistance succeeds in reconciling the apparently irreconcilable—until it constructs a capitalist group based upon purely moral sanctions—so long would it seem impossible to avoid the conclusion that the non-resistant capitalist is a parasite of modern society. He would not fight; but he needs not to fight, since it is notorious that more men would fight to defend him from robbery than would fight to rob him. Though the assistants count philosophers among their ranks, is there

anyone who has yet evolved even the vaguest theory of a non-resistant capitalist State? The frequent attempts to compare the non-resister of to-day with the early Christians would seem calculated only to emphasise the want of logic, and the blindness to facts, already complained of. If ever it becomes evident that these theorists are making in practice all the peniary sacrifices implied in their creed—if ever a man begins to run more risk of death by even the most obstinate defiance of State requirements than by joining his fellow-citizens in the trenches—then will be time to talk of the Christian martyr parallel. No reasonable person can wish that matters should ever come near to this pass; but, until then, the facts are what they are; and those well-intentioned people who compare the non-resister's plight with that of the Christian martyr are only holding up their own protégés to ridicule. The Society of Friends, who would have a better right than any other society to make this claim, would in fact be the last to fall into such exaggerations.

We come back then to our earlier point. Since national security must be maintained by arms, what social and political price are we prepared to pay for it? No price, evidently, which would mean *propter vitam vivendi perdere causas*. If a compulsory defensive militia, even on the Swiss democratic and short-service model, meant the perpetuation of wars in Europe, military rule at home, or the brutalisation of our national manners, or a set-back to free thought, then most of us might think this too dear a price to pay even for victory. But what cause have we for anticipating any of these evil results? History, as we have seen, points in quite another direction; the century *par excellence* of compulsory service in Europe has in fact been the century *par excellence* of political freedom and social progress.

Nor is this so paradoxical as it might seem at first sight. To interest the whole nation in the contingencies of war is, by a double process, to postpone the danger of war. First comes the fact, already acknowledged by disputants on both sides, that a nation in arms cannot so easily be used for aggressive warfare as a hired army. Germany, under her exceptional circumstances, has done so; but France is very different. All of us, like the present writer, have known France under the Second Empire and the Third Republic, have been struck by the enormous growth of pacificism during the last half-century. The Jingoism of the Second Empire, with its semi-mercenary army, had disappeared from among the conscript

of 1914. But it has survived to some extent in Great Britain where voluntarism, for many years past, has defended itself in the boastful language of the Jingo.¹ A year before the outbreak of this war, and again a few months after it, two of our Cabinet ministers bragged to us in words which could hardly be paralleled from the lips of responsible statesmen in any conscript country. One put the fighting value of the volunteer soldier at ten times, the other at three times, that of the conscript. The fault lay here not so much with the speakers as with the traditions of the system for which they spoke; only by the intervention of such a *deus ex machina* can the voluntarist shelter himself from the historical fact that no great war has ever been won under a purely voluntary system. The false note of exaggeration is essential to voluntarist propaganda in military matters, as it was fifty years ago in matters educational. Our besetting temptation was then the pride of ignorance; now, it is the valour of ignorance. The men who are actually seeing and doing our fighting for us are now among the most unsparing in their scorn of these newspaper-braggarts at home. Jaurès especially emphasises the difference between the man who performs military service and the man who talks about it. He notes that the drilled and disciplined citizen acquires a feeling of responsibility which makes him less dangerous to society than the irresponsible enthusiast (p. 54). Experience is against the assumption that national military training encourages the Jingo spirit or the spirit of military adventure—except, of course, in the necessarily exceptional cases where it succeeds in giving a sense of overwhelming force and therefore of moral irresponsibility. Here, then, comes in our second consideration. We ourselves are partly responsible for the apparently overwhelming military superiority of the German nation, and thus for something of their moral irresponsibility. If our armed forces in the past have numbered only about one-eighth of the German forces, this has not been entirely because we have been eight times more peace-loving and more generous than they. Some ten years ago, I had occasion to point out in the *Spectator* that the thermometer of esteem for Britain was steadily falling in Germany, partly on thi

¹ Few things are historically more instructive than a glance at the back numbers of *Punch*. Let the reader look through the cartoons of 1859 onward in which we bragged of our new Volunteer force, and he will realise how unlovely a side there was even to that movement, which can be compared with the magnificent effort of this present war.

² These quotations from Jaurès refer to the abbreviated English translation "Democracy and Military Service" (Simpkin, Marshall & Co., 1s. net).

account. In 1887-8, when I studied at Heidelberg, I found a not unnatural feeling of superiority among those men who knew that they bore in person every national risk. Even pacifist Germans asked me whether the motives at the back of voluntarism in Britain were unmixedly generous, and whether it was really for the final peace of Europe that we should steadily ignore the existence of so many nations in arms. Few people who know Germany will deny that this feeling had grown considerably during the past thirty years. It was natural (if not just) that Continental nations should see in us the generosity of weakness and the valour of ignorance; for it was not only Germany who miscalculated, and we now freely confess how little we ourselves saw the true proportions of things. Our weakness, though perhaps more apparent than real, unquestionably did much to tempt the German spirit of adventure. Continental Socialists, therefore, would seem to have been more clear-sighted than we. A nation may tempt war not only by its own aggressive spirit, but also by a state of unpreparedness out of all proportion to its ordinary diplomatic claims and responsibilities. Jaurès insisted that both these risks were automatically minimised by a system which made all citizens share alike in the risks of offence, and contribute alike to the forces of defence (p. 17.). He saw clearly the enormous superiority of modern armaments for defence, and hoped that a system of short-service democratic militias would so discourage adventure on both sides as to provide the necessary transition between the present era of bloated armaments and an era of arbitration and proportional disarmament. The present war has strikingly fulfilled many of his anticipations. Who can reasonably doubt that, if France had at once "dug in" her four million soldiers all along the frontier, fighting no pitched battles, but simply retiring from trench to trench as at Verdun, the Germans would have conquered far less of her territory than at present? And, that being so, who will believe that the Germans would have been so easily tempted to their present venture?

Jaurès saw clearly, too, how much falsehood there is in the common antithesis between "voluntary" and "compulsory." He pointed out frankly that even our Territorials were often recruited by veiled compulsion; and he insisted that, if France had a more democratic officer-system and a more defensive foreign policy, the French conscript would show all the ardour of the volunteer. Here, again, we have only to look at the actual facts of this war. It is not only thoughtless, but very

mischievous, to talk as if legal compulsion and the voluntary spirit were incompatible. Every Briton is bound to maintain his wife and family, by a law which makes allowance for no conscientious objectors. How many men find the family affections blunted by the existence of this onerous legal obligation? and, if there be any such, at what price should we estimate such a man's family affection, if there were no law in the background to keep him straight?

I have tried to show that the ordinary objections to compulsory service rest upon confusion of thought and neglect of facts. To make an historical case against compulsion, we must artificially confine ourselves to the last two generations of German history, and even shut our eyes to a good deal of what we find there. The past history of Germany and Europe teaches a very different lesson. It not only shows voluntarism always breaking down under the strain of a great war; it shows also that the principle of universal service has been specially characteristic of democracies. To the nation as to the individual, History says: "If you want a thing we done, do it yourself."

Apart, therefore, from the small minority who do not wait to see national defence well done, or indeed done at all, must we not say that a heavy burden of proof lies upon the shoulder of the voluntarist? He ignores the past, and trusts that his party nostrums of "ten to one" or "three to one" will save him from the natural consequences of inefficient organisation. His attitude of contempt and dislike for the soldier, in peacetime, does much to degrade the lives of the men whom we hire to fight for us. While even such determined Continental anti-militarists as Jaurès and Urbain Gohier see no harm in six months or a year of barracks, British voluntarist propaganda lives upon lurid denunciations of the longer barrack-system which it persists in confusing with the shorter.¹ One of the first effects of universal compulsion in Belgium—brought in, be it noted, under pressure from the *Radical-Socialist* "bloc"—was a marked improvement in barrack-life. The Swiss system of compulsion would mean, for Britain, simply compulsory Territorialism, with a far more democratic officer-system. Does

¹ The rate of venereal diseases is higher beyond all comparison in the British and American armies than in those of the Continent. This is, of course, a very difficult subject, but I say with every sense of responsibility that I have never met with any British anti-conscriptionist publication which even attempts to deal scientifically with the matter of barrack-morality, or which betrays the vaguest consciousness of what men like Jaurès and Gohier really thought.

prevailed everywhere, England was the only country in which this theory was most completely carried out. The victors of Crécy were literally clothed in volunteers from a nation whose government was based on rough and ready military training as a "natural right" of great Powers. In the French theory of personal service scarcely survived the idea of taxation; and when at last Charles VII. put it on a basis which enabled him to drive our king out of France, this was at the expense of the liberties of the nation. The mercenary system and arbitrary taxation riveted upon the nation at one single blow; and France had a really national army or a really national army at the Revolution. All this while, the English citizen flourished; it prevented the Tudors from supporting a standing army by strong mercenary armies, and had much to do with the successful revolt of 1642. When we consider the stagnation or decay of French political liberties during the last centuries before the Revolution, and the growth of English liberties during the same period, we begin to understand why democracy and universal service are inseparable in the Frenchman's mind.

Still more significant is the story from 1789 onwards. Dubois-Crancé, one of the ablest Radicals in the Assembly, wished to introduce universal service at once, but nobody listened to him. When the Revolutionary wars broke out in 1792, even the new religion of liberty could not make the voluntary principle a practical success. Out of a nation of at least 23 million, only 84,000 real volunteers were raised. The other revolutionary levies, though for some time dignified with the old name of volunteers, were in fact pressed men: a certain contingent was demanded by Government from each district. Next, in 1793, came the *levée en masse*, and all pretence of voluntarism disappeared. The whole system was finally regularised, and made into an integral part of the constitution, by Jourdan's law of 1798. It was these conscript armies which saved the Republic; nor must we be misled by the superficial exception of Napoleon's despotism. Jaurès, though an anti-militarist, was an able historian; and he agreed with his political opponents that Napoleon's power was not based upon conscription; that some of Napoleon's most serious dangers came from the army; and that at the head of victorious mercenary troops he would have had even more power. Napoleon was Napoleon's despotism, at its worst, half so onerous as the

their initial stages. Even if (as) the friction and the odium of the Swiss model would be still greater, noted, yet this would not alter the problem. It still remains a balance between freedom and loss of national security. For the moment out of the question, we leave the value of National Defence; we only consider the price which it is worth while paying for in relation to the ethical cost.

There is probably a growing body of people who are called questions of principle, in the moral and political sphere, are often to a great extent historical. Although the points at issue between Roman Catholic and Protestant are, at first sight, mainly philosophical, the historical method has already brought each side to a far more sympathetic recognition of the other's point of view than has been possible so long as the discussion had been confined to the strictly philosophical sphere. And, in the present problem, many misconceptions may be avoided by beginning with a brief historical view of Conscription.¹

Paradoxical as the Briton thinks it at first sight, educated Frenchmen have long been familiar with the historical generalisation which connects compulsory military service with democracy, and enlistment by "free contract" with despotism. An anti-militarist like Vaillant, in the French Chamber of Deputies, assumed this as common ground between himself and the militarists whom he attacked. And, indeed, it seems impossible to read history in any other sense. The growth of despotism in Rome was contemporaneous with the decay of the citizen soldier. The first beginnings of democracy in the Middle Ages were organised on the basis of universal citizen-service. From sixteen to sixty, all men were called out to fight side by side in the Italian republics, in the great democratic cities of Flanders, and in those cantons which crystallised into the Swiss confederation. In Italy and in Flanders the decay of political liberty was roughly contemporaneous with the rise of the hireling soldier; in Switzerland democracy and compulsory service have always flourished side by side.

Take, again, the story of England and France. In the fourteenth century, while the theory of universal citizen-service

¹ The assertions here made will be shortly published in fuller form, and in chapter and verse, in a book by the present author, dealing mainly with the historical aspects of the subject.

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necessary? If the soldier is an honest man, why leave
tread the wine-press alone? If dishonest, why pay him
for us? Though peace (thank God!) is the normal state
human life, it is certain that peace has great temptations, and
that war rends the veil from great self-deceptions. Theoreti-
cally, each of us can display more heroism in his own trade
than the soldier in the trenches; but do we realise this in prac-
tice? or are we even moral enough to confess our shortcomings
here? Jacques Novikow, perhaps the most learned of recent
professional pacifists, acknowledged sadly that "the organisa-
tion of intellectual propaganda is almost always closely copied
from the organisation of our standing armies, because these
latter have the most perfect organisation which men have yet
invented on this earth" (*Luttes entre Sociétés Humaines*, 1893,
p. 440). And John Stuart Mill wrote, a generation before
him: "Until labourers and employers perform the work of
industry in the spirit in which soldiers perform that of an army,
industry will never be moralised, and military life will remain
what, in spite of the anti-social nature of its direct object, it
has hitherto been, the chief school of moral co-operation"
(*Essay on Comte*, 1865, p 149). If, as Jaurès was convinced,
the risk of actual war is minimised by the citizen-army system,
so also are the forces of co-operation stimulated; and this frank
recognition of communal duties would seem to mark a real
step forward in ethical evolution.

G. G. COULTON.

CAMBRIDGE.

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